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Motivating Adolescent Readers

by Dr. Michael W. Smith

THE FIRST RECOMMENDATION made in the *Reading Next* report on adolescent literacy is that teachers provide “direct, explicit comprehension instruction” (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006, p. 4).

It sounds simple and obvious, but it’s not. Classic research by Durkin (1978) establishes that even at the early grades teachers tended to provide comprehension *assessment* rather than comprehension *instruction*. That is, teachers tend to assign work and then assess students on the basis of how well they do it.

In our study of the literate lives of adolescent boys both in and out of school (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), Jeff Wilhelm and I found that the assign-and-assess approach is indeed prevalent. Only one student talked about a teacher who provided the kind of explicit instruction *Reading Next* calls for. His comments were inspiring:

I haven’t started reading until this year pretty much. . . . I have been starting novels this year because Mrs. X kinda like assigns the homework and this is the only time it’s really been due so I’ve been reading pretty good novels now and I like John Steinbeck and stuff. A lot of novels like that get to me and Mrs. X’s been kinda showing me the road and the path. I kinda thought reading was dumb, but now I’m kinda getting more into it.

One of the fundamental principles of *Edge* is that it provides the kind of instruction that *Reading Next* calls for and that the students in our study were looking for. It provides that instruction in two ways: through extended work with seven key strategies and particular work with specific genres.

Share the Secrets of Reading

Margaret Meek (1983) does a wonderful job summarizing what we see as the central job of a teacher of reading or literature. She argues that as teachers we need to share the “list of secret things that all accomplished readers know, yet never talk about” (cited in Thomson 1987, p. 109). Literary theorist Peter Rabinowitz (Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998) explains that some of these secret things are true across texts. But he offers a powerful caution:

Let me stress again that . . . no particular rules of reading are universal: Different texts call upon different sets of procedures, just as putting together a bicycle and installing an internal modem require different tools and different skills. (p. 59).

My point is this: The different demands of different kinds of texts mean that the readers must apply general reading strategies in different ways. That means both that readers need a chance to apply general strategies to a wide variety of texts and that they need to learn strategies that are specific to particular kinds of texts.

Give Students the Strategic Edge

In *Edge*, students have repeated opportunities to work with seven robust reading strategies in stories, poetry, expository nonfiction, and many other kinds of texts. They also get a chance to explore how particular texts work through each unit’s genre focus.

A quick illustration: Readers have to make inferences in virtually every text that they read. When they read

“Let’s show students the road and the path to reading.”

stories, one particular kind of inference they have to make is about characters. That's why we work with students to recognize the kind of clues authors of stories provide to reveal their characters, for example, the characters' actions, their words, their physical appearance, how others respond to them, and so on. Readers have to make similar inferences when they read dramas, but making inferences about characters in plays depends more on dialogue. Understanding dialogue requires that readers attend to stage directions. The uniqueness of drama provides a significant challenge to readers, as the boys in our study told us: "I don't like reading plays because it's hard, it's just everything is talking." That's why we work with students to use the text features unique to drama to construct meaning (cf. Esslin, 1987).

If we want our students to be life-long readers, let's show them the "road and the path" to reading. We can't expect them to find it on their own. *Edge* is designed to do just that.

Essential Questions

But strategy instruction alone is not enough to engage kids, according to expectancy value theory, one of the most powerfully explanatory theories I've encountered. In brief, the theory (cf. Eccles and Wigfield, 2002) holds that one's motivation is a function of both one's expectation for success and the value one places on a task. Even if the strategy instruction we provide increases students' expectation of success, they won't be motivated unless they *also* value what we are asking them to do.

One of the students who participated in our study said something in an interview that haunts us to this day:

English is about NOTHING! It doesn't help you DO anything. English is about reading poems and telling about rhythm. It's about commas and [stuff] like that.... What does that have to DO with DOING anything? It's about NOTHING!

His contention was echoed in one way or another by many of the other boys. This is likely a main reason that

many of them rejected the reading they were given to do in school.

But they didn't reject reading outside school. Every one of the young men in our study had an active literate life. Mark read golf magazines to straighten out his slice. Mick read model car magazines to make his model run faster. Maurice read and reread his driver's manual. Barnabas was always on the Internet looking for cheat codes for video games. Wolf was reading an investigation of the nature of evil because he wanted to have a better understanding of what might account for some of the historical events he was so fascinated by.

EQs Make Reading Matter

Edge was designed to help students see that English is about something important. That's why we built our units around essential questions. EQs are the deep and abiding questions we all face as we think about our lives: Does an individual's success depend more on the individual or the environment? What keeps us together and what pulls us apart? Reading matters when it gives readers insight into questions like these. Robert Coles (1989) in *The Call of Stories* quotes a student:

When I have some big moral issue, some question to tackle, I think I try to remember what my folks have said, or I imagine them in my situation—or even more these days I think of [characters about whom I've read]. Those folks, they're people for me... they really speak to me—there's a lot of me in them, or vice versa. I don't know how to put it, but they're voices, and they help me make choices. I hope when I decide "the big ones" they'll be in there pitching. (p. 203)

Edge is built around EQs, so when students face similar questions in their lives, the texts they read will be in there pitching.

EQs Foster Active Participation

Considering EQs requires students to be active participants in their own learning. Study after study of secondary education has noted how students are cast in the role of passive recipients of knowledge. Instead of

“Rich discussions result in notable improvements in comprehension.”

being asked to think deeply, students are often asked to fill in the blanks and to guess the answer that teachers are looking for.

Nystrand and his colleagues (1997) document how important rich discussions are. Discussions generated from what he calls authentic questions occur on average only “50 seconds per class in eighth grade and less than 15 seconds in grade 9” (p. 42). But such rich discussions resulted in significant improvements in comprehension.

One of the reasons that Nystrand and his colleagues found so few authentic discussions is the pressure teachers felt to “go somewhere” (p. 22) in their classroom discussions (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995). That somewhere was usually to a shared interpretation of a text. Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith’s study demonstrated that teachers often took on the role of classroom discussion leader and that students recognized and accepted their role as passive followers.

Because EQs clearly have no right answer, they provide a situation that requires students and teachers to take on new roles. Students become active agents in their learning, and teachers become part of the inquiry, too.

EQs Promote Wide Reading

Another way that EQs foster students’ valuing the reading, writing, speaking, and listening we ask them to do is that EQs allow a wide variety of texts to be brought into conversation with each other. The big issues that EQs raise are taken up in stories and poems and Web sites and magazine articles, and on and on. Every single boy in our study was actively engaged in literacy, though most often they were not engaged with texts in school. Other researchers have come to similar conclusions (cf., Mahiri, 2004; Moje, 2000). *Edge* provides students an opportunity to use text types that they value to shed light on the issues raised in literary texts. ❖

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